

## Future reflections Future (re)composition

Marsha Bradfield & Katrine Hjelde

### Abstract

In October 2009, Future Reflections Research Group presented *Future (Re) Composition* at The Art Text symposium in Gothenburg, Sweden.

Through this performative presentation, the group represented by Marsha Bradfield and Katrine Hjelde endeavoured to embody as well as problematise the interrelations between what is often termed 'the practical' and 'the written' aspects of art research outcomes. Staged as a dialogue, the following discussion synthesises the version of *Future (Re)Composition* presented at The Art Text with reflective/reflexive commentary informed by conversations occurring in/around/through this research event. The concept of hybridity anchors this dialogue, providing a focus for exploring three areas of practice in Future Reflections: notions of site, perceptual tensions between individual collaborators and the group as a whole, and questions around audience related to sending out and receiving texts, namely: writing, speaking, showing and reading collaborative art research. Negotiating these areas through dialogue, this collaboratively authored text models an approach for representing collaborative art research.



## Introduction

On the 9th of October 2009, Future Reflections Research Group<sup>1</sup> presented Future (Re)Composition at The Art Text symposium in Gothenburg, Sweden. Through this performative presentation, the group, represented by Marsha Bradfield and Katrine Hjelde, endeavoured to performatively embody as well as problematise the interrelations between what is often termed 'the practical' and 'the written' aspects of art research outcomes. Staged as a dialogue between Bradfield and Hjelde, the following discussion synthesises the version of Future (Re)Composition presented at the Art Text with reflective/reflexive<sup>2</sup> commentary informed by conversations occurring in/around/through this research event.

## Part 1: Setting the scene

1. Future Reflections is a research group based at Chelsea College of Art and Design comprising of three PhD students, each undertaking a practice-based fine art PhD.
2. Future Reflections *reflects* on its collaborative art research through ongoing self-observation as a way of tracking and calibrating the group's practice. The collaboration is also *reflexive*, with its practice bending back on itself. The papers and presentations are self-referential, engaging Joseph Kosuth's sense that: "Art, it can be argued, *describes* reality. But, unlike language, artworks – it can be argued--simultaneously describe how they describe it." *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (London: MIT Press, 2002), 247.

Two artist researchers, two laptops (Macs), two projectors (rented/borrowed for the occasion by the organisers), two grey coats, two mirror badges, two PowerPoint presentations using text and image, one paper, read/presented in turn, a chair, Mick Wilson Dean of Gradcam, Dublin, an international audience consisting of approximately one third of the delegates to the symposium and a grand, but not the grandest room in Dicksonska Palatset, the venue hosting the symposium on behalf of Valand School of Fine Art, university of Gothenburg.

## Part 2: Dialogue

**Katrine Hjelde:** Over the last three years, Future Reflections has explored collaborative art research through a series of eight projects aimed at establishing a reciprocal practice of art as research and research as art. These projects have largely comprised performative presentations for art research conferences, as well as papers for publication, where the group presents itself as a case study of collaborative art research. Through these presentations and papers, Future Reflections has considered specific methods, sensibilities and outcomes that characterize collaborative art production. In particular, the group has observed a growing body of tacit

knowledge contouring its activities. If this body is composed of diverse perceptions and expectations, each member of the group holds these to different degrees and in different ways.

**Marsha Bradfield:** Intent on surfacing and engaging with this knowledge, Future Reflections engages in group discussions aimed at building common ground among individual members.

**KH:** Through these discussions, we aim to identify shifts in our perceptions of past work and new and emergent understandings of our shared research, understandings that alter the group's self-understanding and, by extension, its self-representation in performative papers/presentations like this one.

**MB:** Based on the benefits we gain by recalibrating our research through group discussion, we contend there's a real need for verbal and visual texts that more effectively demonstrate this process, a process that's often effaced in collaboratively written texts intent on disseminating research outcomes. Our aim here is to experiment with representing what normally occurs 'off the page' in the production of such texts. For it's our sense this kind of exchange is foundational to collaborative writing about collaborative research.

**KH:** Hence our contribution here aims to inscribe and enact the material practice of dialogue as the foundation for integrative art collaboration.

**MB:** Following Patricia Montiel-Overall's typology of collaborative structures, integrative collaboration is marked by shared thinking, shared planning and

shared creation.<sup>3</sup> Collaborators work together to produce in ways that are beyond their individual capabilities.

**KH:** An important aspect of our work as Future Reflections involves understanding just what this kind of collaboration entails. What are we doing? How are we doing it? What are the distinguishing features of collaborative research marked by an integrative approach? What do we gain from working together? What do we lose? What are some of the challenges and possibilities of representing this shared knowledge enterprise?

**MB:** One approach we've found useful for tackling these questions involves what might be termed a 'subject-specific discussion,' which is what we aim to model here.

**KH:** The subject of this discussion is hybridity. For The Art Text we introduced this concept and tried to establish how notions of hybridity can be seen to operate in our collaboration, specifically as a way of negotiating our practice in three particular respects: notions of site, tensions between the perceptions of individual collaborators and the group as a whole, and questions around audience related to sending out/receiving texts, namely: writing, speaking, showing and reading collaborative art research.

**MB:** Deciding that as a conceptual frame, hybridity has heuristic value for not only understanding but representing our collaborative art research, this dialogue concludes by speculating about the literacies involved in authoring art research texts, both as writers and readers.

3. Patricia Montiel-Overall, "A Theoretical Understanding of Teacher and Library Collaboration." *School Libraries World Wide*, vol. 11 (2005).

## Part 2.1: Hybridity



**KH:** According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “hybrid” comes from the Latin “hybrida”, meaning the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar. So on the one hand, the term involves biological mixing. On the other, it involves cultural combining.

**MB:** (Re)focusing Future Reflections artistic research through the lens of hybridity, I'm struck by the potential of this idea for identifying points of contact and combination in the practice...including tensions between.

**KH:** But before exploring specific tensions, it seems important to say a little more about the conceptual history of hybridity.

**MB:** Alright.

**KH:** From its beginnings, this term has expressed anxiety around otherness. Although the Oxford English Dictionary tells us the word 'hybridity' first appeared in the 17th century, it wasn't until later, in anxious discussions around racial mixing in the 18th and 19th centuries, that usage proliferated.

In addition to referencing an animal offspring, a hybrid also designated 'the child of a freeman and slave'. Hence the discourse of hybridity has long circumscribed a fear of difference.

**MB:** And addressing this fear has shaped the development of hybridity as an idea.

**KH:** Yes, the concept was reappropriated and recuperated in discussions around identity politics in the 1980s and 90s, with Homi Bhabha's post-colonial discourse being pivotal in this respect. Bhabha identified hybridity as the process by

which the coloniser tries to negotiate the identity of the colonised into an overarching perspective. But the colonised's resistance to translation produces something familiar but also distinct. Bhabha contends the resulting hybrid promotes ambivalence and, by extension, alters the balance of power.<sup>4</sup>

**MB:** With the ebbing of post-colonial studies, the term hybridity appears ripe for redeployment and, mindful of the concept's complex history, it seems this noun/adjective/verb could be useful for perceiving Future Reflections' practice beyond either/or thinking, beyond binaries, to animate the tensions among the researchers' different points of view.

**KH:** As well as between their research as art and text.

## Part 2.2: Beyond individual/group

**MB:** Returning to Bhabha's idea that negotiating identity produces ambivalence and recalling his sense that the colonised's resistance to assimilation results in something familiar but different, the issue of power again comes to the fore. Who or what is colonising whom or what in the context of Future Reflections and what kinds of ambivalence does this produce?

**KH:** One way of addressing this question is by thinking about the colonisation of concepts in collaboration. While some concepts are introduced by individual members, informed by their respective research, others are developed by the group. Either way, the concepts develop through collaboration. They evolve as the group thinks them together and puts the concepts into practice. It is notable, perhaps, that the opinions I hold as a member of Future Reflec-

tions often differ from those exercised in my individual research, and yet these two practices feed off one another.

**MB:** This idea that concepts are colonised fascinates me, that they are concurrently occupied by both individuals and the group. It's perhaps significant that nothing resembling territories has arisen in Future Reflections. It's not so much about such-and-such being mine and such-and-such being yours, about linking authorship and ownership. What instead emerges is a kind of shared subjectivity: a group self fashioned through collaboration. Perhaps 'group selves' is a better metaphor? Either way, this self/selves, this hybrid subjectivity, is never unitary; there is no homunculus directing our actions, no coordinating agent at the centre of Future Reflections.

**KH:** No, and nor is this self/selves always visible. I glimpse it/them most often when we attempt to narrate our practice by piecing together the fragments of our experience. This story, however, is always partial in the same way the Future Reflections' self/selves is never unitary and only visible from time to time.

**MB:** Before considering this issue of narration, it strikes me there's an important point to be made about this hybrid self/selves as evolving from collaboration as itself a hybrid enterprise. Future Reflections' self-organisation as a flat hierarchy is indicative in this regard.

**KH:** Yes, although we agree in principle on this form of self-governance, how it structures our activities is never given. In practice, this involves constantly negotiating the desires, needs, sensibilities of individual members and those of the group as a whole.

4. Homi Bhabha, "Introduction: Locations of Culture," in *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1-28.

**MB:** This is a pivotal if obvious point. There's never an exact fit between the needs of individual members and the needs of the group and recalibrating these differences is an ongoing process in collaborative practice.

Let me (briefly) illuminate this point via Mikhail Bakhtin's sense that language, and by extension meaning, is always shaped through tensions between monologic and dialogic forces. While monologic forces, often servicing overarching agendas, like those of the state or religion, seek to standardise or unify meaning by presenting a definitive of point of view, dialogic forces aim to rupture this Truth (with a capital "T") by presenting different points of view, different perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

**KH:** Your comment alludes to the tension between the monologic tendency of a group position in Future Reflections, which aspires to be shared and coherent, and the dialogic impulse of the group's members... your, mine and Catherine's desire to advance our individual agendas and address our respective concerns.

**MB:** Yes, but 'showing' this tension in representations of collaborative art research is a very difficult thing to do. Or at least it's proven difficult to demonstrate in ways that are accessible and meaningful to an external audience.

**KH:** While I think we all have different perceptions of Future Reflections' research and in this way we agree to disagree, we also, I believe, each of us, and in our own way, has an uneasy relationship with what we have been referring to as a group position. Even though we all author this position, I do not feel a lot of ownership of it and this is partly because it...

5. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

**MB:** It embodies 'the voice of FR', but I'm interrupting you.

**KH:** As you were saying, we have come to refer to the group's shared position as the 'the voice of FR'. And this voice can, in important ways, be compared to what Charles Green calls "the third hand" in collaboration. However, in contrast to Green's sense that a group's collaborative identity is greater than the sum of the identities of its individual members,<sup>6</sup> it is my sense the voice of the FR is not more but less...

**MB:** This seems related to your earlier point about narration and partiality. In the same way the group's accounts are always partial, our common narrator, the voice of FR, is always emergent. So it is kind of placeholder, which helps, I think, to explain why invites ambivalence. This voice demands we constantly re-examine how it represents the group and how this representation meshes with our own perceptions.

**KH:** Perhaps it's more productive to think about 'the voice of FR' as evidence of a phantom collaborator to whom we personally feel an ambivalent sense of responsibility.

**MB:** Yes, I find myself speaking in this voice as I describe Future Reflections to anyone beyond the group, to an external audience.

**KH:** And I believe I do this because although I know I am always speaking from a specific and situated position as just one member of Future Reflections, it nevertheless seems important to be able to speak on behalf of the group, to be able to articulate a shared experience.

6. Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001).

**MB:** But in the same instant I recognize myself ventriloquising the voice of FR, I'm reminded of the tension between Future Reflections' group position and the members' respective position(s) and how the incongruity of these perspectives shapes the various understandings at play in this research.

**KH:** This suggests a parallel to me: moving between individual and group positions and moving between an art practice and written reports on this practice.

**MB:** You're thinking of reflections, descriptions and theoretical elaborations of this practice in written form?

**KH:** Yes. Increasingly, there are artists who produce art writing, art as writing, and Future Reflections has experimented with this approach. But there are many others who write *about* their practice. This entails translating their practice into a different medium. What often results is a kind of split object: there is the practice and there is a written representation of the practice and instead of being complimentary, they end up compromising each other.

**MB:** This partly depends, I think, on a question of fidelity. If the artist views writing about her practice as a kind of betrayal that must be committed to fulfil an institutional requirement, then silos of activity are inevitable. If, however, she understands both the practice and the writing as creative expression, or writing as an extension of art practice... Well, new opportunities begin to emerge, opportunities for experimenting with the 'artness' of the research as spread across artwork/practice and writing. It strikes me this hybrid model has profound implications for art research. It could provide a way of situating art-as-research as a particular kind of cultural production.

### Part 2.3: Site

**KH:** Perhaps another example of hybridity in Future Reflections will indicate other ways that art research can accommodate diverse aspects. I am thinking here of the unfolding of Future Reflection's performative presentations in time and space.

**MB:** Yes, The Art Text symposium is an interesting example in this regard. As a university initiative located in a former palace, it comprised a complex site for interaction and understanding, a kind of hybrid event.



**KH:** Indeed, to engineer a hybrid *space* can be seen as an attempt to locate a *new site* for the activities of artistic research. The magnificent building hosting the Art Text event, the Dicksonska Palatset, is not like an art school studio, malleable and transformable. It is a space that will assert itself, formally, historically and politically. The territory of the Palace is here operating as a temporary hybridised site for the activities of discussing a particular aspect of art research, art as writing, what we can call the written art text. As participants/presenters we have had to adapt to this space, literally work around it, within it, colonising it.

**MB:** Of course, the site of art research will (like all research) always operate in relation to contexts, artistic, institutional etc.

**KH:** Yes, it may seem very obvious to state this, but as an artist researcher, I am interested in how these temporal hybrid sites offer up the potential for a particular kind of *work*, how they mirror or divert our shared/individual anxieties and ambivalences about the activity of art research as art writing and how a place like Dicksonska Palatset lends a form of authority, through its history and opulence, to this undertaking, for us and for the event as a whole.

We ask: What is the *site* of representation for art research? If it is writing, what is this writing? Where is this writing? Future Reflections starts with the artistic research conference as a main signifying context for the group's work, we proceed to engage with this signifying context through what Miwon Kwon<sup>7</sup> would call a discursive site-specific practice. The conference site, this conference site was very much situated, physically in the Dicksonska palatset, institutionally through Valand School of Fine Art - Gothenburg University, and discursively through art research/art writing.

7. Miwon Kwon has outlined a genealogy of site-specific practice, from physical, phenomenological, institutional to discursive. Discursive site-specific practice is not dependent on a physical site, but operates through sites, making these sites functional. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another Site specific Art and Locational Identity* (US: MIT Press, 2004).



**MB:** Yet we can also think of the conference as distributed. It's inscribed in the papers, for instance, that compose this edition *ArtMonitor*, with the publication extending the conference outside of the event itself, echoing the event, absorbing it to some degree, but taking on a life of its own.

**KH:** The work of art research, particularly through art writing is an ongoing negotiation of boundaries, (sometimes even seen as boundary contraventions), in terms of academic disciplines, as Henk Borgdorff has pointed out<sup>8</sup>. The negotiation of boundaries that we have to do through art research causes tension, anxiety for the individual and the institution, authorities becomes ambivalent through the constant shifts across boundaries. Hybrids can show up boundaries for what they are, mostly arbitrary and institutional delineations of carving up knowledge(s) and its associated power.

**MB:** Johan Öberg said something after our presentation that seems related to this point. He observed our paper seemed to originate in a particular "regime".

**KH:** Future Reflection is indeed situated in relation to a regime, all of us who have been involved with Future Reflections are PhD students at Chelsea (part of Chelsea, Camberwell, Wimbledon Graduate School). Being explicit about our regime is a way to hold up how we are a particular construct articulated in conjunction between our individual interests, our group interests as well as the institutional parameters that we operate within. Institutionally there is always a regime, this is undeniable and unavoidable. However we are not so much involved with an institutional critique of University of the Arts, London or of UK-style

art research, although this has come into our work and into the reading of the work, but we are more concerned with articulating the hybridized graft points where what we do is directly or indirectly a response to the institutional site of UAL and discursive site of art research. As there is always a regime, articulating one regime allows others to come into relief also.

#### Part 2.4: Reflection

**MB:** So far we have used hybridity as a lens to look at the individual/group relationship and the ways in which Future Reflections negotiates various sites. But can we discuss this in terms of method at all – and should we?

**KH:** Art Research is a hybrid between different traditions in and of art and research. In terms of method, one way to advance, to grasp, or to work directly with this hybrid of art research, is to use reflection.

**MB:** Yes, but reflection is a complex subject. Recall Mick Wilson's comment following our presentation. He seemed to be asking: Are there some forms of reflection that go nowhere beyond a narcissistic act? Are they dead ends? He said and we agree, I think, that reflection is *not* what differentiates art research from art. So what exactly do we gain from reflection in art research?

**KH:** I still think reflection has potential here, but we have to be careful as to how we use it, and how we do not use it. Articulating reflection as a kind of discreet zone serves to entrench the binary of art and research, in a way that is perhaps less productive for the field. Writing becomes reduced to that which binds them together. Perhaps reflection is something that distinguishes the art text?

8. In a paper given at Sensuous Knowledge 6 Conference in Bergen 2009.

**MB:** But before we start down that route, it's worth recalling that *reflection* is a fluid term and has no agreed meaning. It is heavily involved with the discourses of pedagogy as well as with some schools of philosophy, (like hermeneutics). And reflection is mostly inscribed with a *purpose*, but one which needs to be defined/refined in each instance.

**KH:** Often referred to in artistic research is Donald Schön, who has coined the term reflection-in-action for what he sees as the ongoing kind of reflection that practitioners of all kinds (doctors to artist) undertake. His notion of reflection-in-action relates to problem solving, to "thinking on ones feet", and it is coupled with reflection-on-action, reflection after the event<sup>9</sup>. Reflection in and on action essentially relates to learning, and as a way to validate practice based knowledge within academia.

**MB:** It is worth acknowledging, I think, some of the questions we ask of ourselves in our collaborative practice. We wonder, for instance, does collaborative art research prompt a different kind of reflection than that undertaken by an individual artist on his/her individual practice? Assuming it does, do we manage to represent this type of reflection in our research outcomes? Addressing these questions in a substantial way lies beyond the scope of this dialogue. But what we *can* say is that Future Reflections' practice encourages a different kind of reflection to, for instance, reflection in/on action. It's different, I think, because it doesn't instrumentalise reflection in such an immediate way. It's not so much about making a claim or verifying knowledge. It's about creating a space for group introspection that's playful and emergent. We never quite know what will arise, if anything

9. Donald Schön *The Reflective Practitioner. How professionals think in action* (London: Temple Smith, 1983).

**KH:** Thus reflection/reflexion can be seen as intrinsic to many kinds of art practice, and not just as a discursively based, after the event, confession. We understand our way of working, writing and making as *self-reflective*.

**MB:** By which you mean it's a way of working that self-consciously mirrors its own image and explicitly reflects both the construction and function of the research process in the research outcomes.

**KH:** Yes -this allows for a *reflexive* approach where both the art and the writing continually attempt to turn back on themselves, not just as a hall of mirrors but *as a way to engage with the construction of the constitute parts in this endeavour* for instance as an expanded art writing. Reflexivity in art practice opens up the work, as opposed to closing it down through a kind of verification. The performative presentation in Gothenburg was an attempt to enact a particular kind of reflection/reflexion between the art researchers, the text and the image and the distribution of both through technology sited within the academic institution. This form of reflexion makes for a distributed artwork, which replaces the art object as such with both different kinds of institutional frames whilst drawing attention to these, as well as frames that relate to, for instance, technology used. The reflexive open-ended artwork, however, can cause anxiety in art research terms as it will not conform to the authority of verified research.

**MB:** Because we produce our work collaboratively, we're always reflectively and reflexively relating to one another's input. Of course this process causes misunderstanding and misinterpretation from time to time. The dialogic forms that we have favoured (between group members, between image/text, between dif-

ferent kinds of technologies and distributions) explore these misunderstandings and misinterpretations in an attempt to establish common ground between us. I think we try to make visible the seams and grafts between the elements of our research as a hybrid enterprise by critically tracing where the development of our shared knowledges This strikes me as something different from narcissism, which is more characterised by a non-questioning, non-critical reflection.

### Part 3: Conclusion – Towards new literacies

**KH:** Yes, but perhaps narcissism still has something to offer, but that is another discussion. We have to finish here now. Conclusions do not sit well with an idea of opening up the work, so instead let us try to round up by suggesting a direction for future writing in/as art research.



**MB:** This raises for me the question of literacies. Developing new literacies, new ways of reading and writing art and art research, entails a two-step process. First, there's the challenge of questioning the conventions of the written research text, and this involves unpicking what Foucault would call its 'discursive formations,' i.e. fields of statements that constitute<sup>10</sup> their objects through various tactics, including, in the case of research, the holy grail of objectivity. Art researchers are already doing this by writing in ways that bridge binaries, like the verbal and visual (and by extension, reading and looking) and the monologic and the dialogic. But this is only the beginning. Evolving from this critique, the second stage involves developing alternative literacies, reflexive literacies that acknowledge the terms of their representation as performative, as actually producing the objects of their research.

10 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Oxon: Routledge, 1989).

**KH:** Not only performative, I would say, but also accessible. For these literacies need to be expressive *and* communicative. It is a mistake, I think, to accept that one characteristic comes at the expense of the other. The challenge is to approach both in a spirit of ambivalence and do more rather than less. Instead of either producing an expressive text or a communicative one, art research needs to develop forms that hybridize the two and create texts that signify in rich, complex and unexpected ways.